

## Durham Research Online

---

### Deposited in DRO:

18 December 2019

### Version of attached file:

Published Version

### Peer-review status of attached file:

Peer-reviewed

### Citation for published item:

Crawforth, Hannah and Jackson, Lucy C. M. (2019) 'Greek tragedy on the university stage : Buchanan and Euripides.', in *Gathering force : early modern British literature in transition, 1557–1623.* , 340-355 .

### Further information on publisher's website:

<https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/gathering-force-early-modern-british-literature-in-transition-15571623/FCB00F37FCC85CC1314A08BFF7784DF2>

### Publisher's copyright statement:

This material has been published in *Gathering Force: Early Modern British Literature in Transition, 1557–1623* edited by Kristen Poole and Lauren Shohet. This version is free to view and download for personal use only. Not for re-distribution, re-sale or use in derivative works. © Cambridge University Press 2019

### Additional information:

---

### Use policy

The full-text may be used and/or reproduced, and given to third parties in any format or medium, without prior permission or charge, for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes provided that:

- a full bibliographic reference is made to the original source
- a [link](#) is made to the metadata record in DRO
- the full-text is not changed in any way

The full-text must not be sold in any format or medium without the formal permission of the copyright holders.

Please consult the [full DRO policy](#) for further details.

## *Greek Tragedy on the University Stage: Buchanan and Euripides*

*Hannah Crawforth and Lucy Jackson*

THIS, THIS, *is* HE: *give place ye Roman Bards;*  
Ye Grecian Bards give place: THIS, THIS *is* HE. —Francis Peck<sup>1</sup>

Francis Peck's jubilant proclamation of John Milton's right to a place among the ancient Latin and Greek poets owes to a colossal mistake. Upon discovering a "small piece, published . . . in 1642," and determining "to peep a little into the book," Peck excitedly "threw aside . . . for the moment, a great heap of other old pamphlets which I had just then picked up & sat me down."<sup>2</sup> Peck was thrilled by his discovery of what he took to be "the Sixth of Mr. John Milton's Nine most celebrated poems, & *one* of the hitherto unknown pieces of his."<sup>3</sup> But Peck's enthusiasm was misplaced. Instead of a new work by Milton, Peck had actually found an English translation by an unknown author from the Latin play *Baptistes* of George Buchanan (1506–82), a humanist who lived a hundred years before Milton.<sup>4</sup> If less famous than Milton today, this Scot of modest means had nonetheless, by the final quarter of the sixteenth century, gained a reputation as one of Europe's foremost intellectuals, serving as tutor to Michel de Montaigne, Mary Queen of Scots, and James VI, and authoring several key works of political theory.<sup>5</sup> Buchanan also wrote significant works of drama at the Collège de Guyenne in Bordeaux, where he taught

<sup>1</sup> Epigraph to *New Memoirs of the Life and Poetical Works of Mr John Milton* (London, 1740).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 267–68.     <sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 269.

<sup>4</sup> Anon., *Tyrannicall Government Anatomized &c.* (London, 1642).

<sup>5</sup> Buchanan had strong connections to the Sidney circle via the diplomat and historian Daniel Rogers; the group shared his interests in resistance theory. He also had a profound influence on Edmund Spenser; see Andrew Hadfield, *Edmund Spenser: A Life* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2012), 63, 67, 108. See also Hadfield, "Spenser and Buchanan," in *George Buchanan: Political Thought in Early Modern Britain and Europe*, ed. Caroline Erskine and Roger Mason (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), 71–86 (p. 75). On Buchanan's connections to European intellectuals such as Henricus Stephanus and Julius Caesar Scaliger (the foremost authority on Aristotle's *Poetics* in the sixteenth century), see Debora Kuller Shuger, *The Renaissance Bible: Scholarship, Sacrifice, and Subjectivity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 135.

for several years in the 1540s. He authored four plays for performance by his Bordeaux students, all either translated from, or strongly influenced by, the tragedies of Euripides: *Medea* (1544), *Jephthes* (1554), *Alcestis* (1556), and *Baptistes* (1577).<sup>6</sup> Buchanan's tragedies reveal the significance of plays performed both at and by schools and universities, an additional facet of dramatic performance during the period treated in this volume.<sup>7</sup>

Roger Ascham commends Buchanan in his *The Scholemaster* (1570) as one of the "Few men, in writing of Tragedies in our dayes" who have successfully followed Greek tragic precedent, showing "the trew touch of *Aristotles* precepts" and imitating "*Euripides* examples."<sup>8</sup> This chapter will show the profound depth of this important humanist's engagement with Euripides, charting the particular rhetorical and political inheritance of the Greek tragedian and the tradition he embodied in early modern Europe, which Buchanan seeks to reanimate in his own plays. Taking as our starting point Peck's eighteenth-century rediscovery of a mid-seventeenth-century drama (which turns out to be the work of a sixteenth-century author interpolating texts from the fifth century BCE), we will argue for a strongly diachronic sense of what "local" reading – the concern of Part IV of this volume – can be. Since each of these local contexts transforms Buchanan's plays, our interpretation of his dramatic work is not synchronically limited to the historical moment in which they were written. Instead, we show that fully historicizing specific contexts requires us to explore precisely how they invoke or imagine the past. This diachronic approach reaches back to the social and political circumstances that inform Euripides's tragedies, as well as forward into the reception of his own texts. The strongly synchronic predisposition of recent historicism has limited the kinds of "context" usually considered relevant to Buchanan's plays. By contrast, our chapter will argue that the classical political concerns that shaped Euripides's tragedies remain relevant in the early modern period.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>6</sup> With composition dates uncertain, we here give dates of publication. See *George Buchanan: Tragedies*, ed. Peter Sharratt and Peter G. Walsh (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1983), 2–4.

<sup>7</sup> For complementary discussion of drama at the Inns of Court (the London law schools), its interplay with commercial practice, and remarks about theatrical experience in schools producing knowledgeable public audiences, see chapter 3 of this volume.

<sup>8</sup> Quoted in Jonathan Walker, "Introduction: Learning to Play," in *Early Modern Academic Drama*, ed. Jonathan Walker and Paul D. Streufert (Farnham: Ashgate, 2008), 1–18 (p. 1).

<sup>9</sup> On Greek drama in early modern England, see for instance Tanya Pollard, "What's Hecuba to Shakespeare?," *Renaissance Quarterly* 65.4 (2012): 1060–93, and Claire Kenward, "The Reception of Greek Drama in Early Modern England," in *A Handbook to the Reception of Greek Drama*, ed. Betine van Zyl Smit (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016), 173–98.

The text Peck had rediscovered was an English version of Euripides's *Baptistes*, subtitled by Peck "A Sacred Dramatic Poem, *in Defence of Liberty*." Peck's subtitle casts the tragedy as a rhetorical work striving for political effect, revealing a point of connection between Milton and Buchanan, which subtends Peck's misattribution. The two authors shared a commitment to the political potential of rhetoric, also evident in the Euripidean tragedies that so powerfully shaped both writers.<sup>10</sup> The skilled use of words – particularly their capability to soothe, flatter, and deceive – was of vital importance in early modern Europe, just as it had been in ancient Athens, a "society dominated institutionally by the assembly and the law-courts," Simon Goldhill writes, in which "the discussion of the best way to use language (persuasion, argumentation, rhetoric) is an issue of considerable social and political importance."<sup>11</sup> Goldhill's description of Euripides's Athens pertains equally to Buchanan's own moment (and, eventually, to Milton's). In the wake of the Reformation, and with the rise of print culture, the relationship between words and actions was once more a pressing social and political question in Europe.

Recent critics have worked to show how this rhetorical aspect of Euripidean drama relates to what Goldhill identifies as a fifth-century BCE "linguistic turn," during which "the role of language in the production of meaning, in the development of thought, in the uncertainties of reference," was debated "not only at the level of philosophical enquiry or literary self-consciousness but also in the more general awareness of the possibilities and dangers of the tricks and powers of words."<sup>12</sup> Matthew Wright documents the influence on Euripides of ancient language philosophers including Parmenides, Leucippus, and Democritus: "thinkers [who] had also been questioning the relationship between reality and language."<sup>13</sup> Wright also notes the importance of the ancient Greek rhetorician and Sophist Gorgias's

<sup>10</sup> Milton did in fact know Buchanan's work and esteemed him as both one of the foremost political thinkers of an earlier generation and as an important poet whose efforts to fuse Christian theology with Greek tragedy offer a key precursor to his own *Samson Agonistes*. See J. T. T. Brown, "An English Translation of George Buchanan's *Baptistes* Attributed to Milton," in *George Buchanan: Glasgow Quatercentenary Studies* (Glasgow: Maclehose, 1907): 61–173 (pp. 72–74). See also Hannah Crawford, "The Politics of Greek Tragedy in *Samson Agonistes*," in *The Seventeenth Century* 31.2 (2016): 239–60.

<sup>11</sup> Simon Goldhill, *Reading Greek Tragedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 2.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. Goldhill plays upon the title of Richard Rorty's edited collection *The Linguistic Turn: Essays in Philosophical Method* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967). See also G. B. Kerferd, *The Sophistic Moment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 78, quoted in Goldhill, *Reading Greek Tragedy*, 232.

<sup>13</sup> Matthew Wright, *Euripides' Escape-Tragedies: A Study of Helen, Andromeda, and Iphigenia among the Taurians* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 268–69.

lost treatise, *On What is Not*, for Euripides's interest in "the relationship between reality and various forms of illusion or delusion."<sup>14</sup> Gorgias made a notorious visit to Athens during 427 BCE when Euripides was at the height of his dramatic powers, prompting a long-standing association between the tragedian's rhetorical style and that of the Sophists, whose highly performative oratory was attacked by Plato as mere artifice with little relation to truth.<sup>15</sup> The dramatist Aristophanes was instrumental in establishing the view Plato articulates; his *Frogs* repeatedly compares the old style of Aeschylus and the newer rhetoric of Euripides, connecting the latter with "glib chatter and over-refined logic": "chattering" [*lalia*] and "glibness" [*stōmulia*].<sup>16</sup> At one point in the play, the two tragedians' respective words are weighed in a gigantic set of scales; Aeschylus's are found to be satisfyingly weighty (*mega*), while Euripides's are light (*koufos*) (1378–1410).

From antiquity onwards, then, Euripides was associated not only with rhetorical skill, but also with the political utility of such powers. This leads Quintilian and Dio Chrysostomos (both first century CE) to recommend his writings to anyone seeking a rhetorical training for political ends.<sup>17</sup> Observing that "rhetoric is intrinsic to Euripides's conception of tragedy and that it is often the source of 'tragic' effects, in the sense that it exposes to scrutiny the contingency of values and illusory quality of human skills," Donald Mastronarde hints at Euripides's frequent tragic evocations of highly trained rhetoricians plying their verbal talents, and the often problematic nature of such "illusory" powers.<sup>18</sup> The potential for rhetorical sophistication to elide true intentions (onstage or, more dangerously, in the political sphere) is a recurring source of disquiet in Euripides's tragedies – perhaps most famously in Hippolytus's exclamation that "My tongue swore, but my mind is not on oath" (612). The suggestive gap between the work of the tongue and that of the mind, or heart, is here ripe for dramatic exploitation of a kind that many critics have characterized as a particularly Euripidean brand of irony. This aspect of his tragedies

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. Gorgias's treatise is also known as *On Nature*; see Jeroen A. E. Bons, "Gorgias the Sophist and Early Rhetoric," in *A Companion to Greek Rhetoric*, ed. Ian Worthington (Oxford: Blackwell, 2009), 37–47, and James I. Porter, "The Seductions of Gorgias," *Classical Antiquity* 12.2 (1993): 267–99.

<sup>15</sup> Donald Mastronarde, *The Art of Euripides: Dramatic Technique and Social Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 209.

<sup>16</sup> Aristophanes, *Frogs*, in *Frogs. Assemblywomen. Wealth.*, ed. and trans. Jeffrey Henderson, Loeb Classical Library: Aristophanes IV (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 3–237. Subsequent references are cited parenthetically by line number; here, line 1069. On Euripides's sophisticated rhetoric, see Wright, *Euripides' Escape-Tragedies*, 252; and R. P. Winnington-Ingram, "Euripides: *poietes sophos*," *Arethusa* 2.2 (1969), 127–42.

<sup>17</sup> Mastronarde, *The Art of Euripides*, 2, 7. <sup>18</sup> Ibid., 207.

seemingly appeals to early modern readers and writers, who are themselves particularly alert to such tensions between rhetoric and action.<sup>19</sup>

Buchanan's plays reinvigorate Euripides's concern with how language relates to action, a preoccupation lent additional urgency by the performance of drama and by the performativity of rhetoric in the sophistic model that was both so influential and so disturbing to fifth-century-BCE sensibilities. At worst, rhetoric loses all relation to the world, words become disconnected from deeds, and oratorical power tips over into hypocrisy and even tyranny. At best, this protean power allows the language of the past to speak to the later audiences of the unimagined future. The present chapter argues that the preoccupation with the relationship between words and deeds that Buchanan derives from Euripides takes on highly localized political dimensions in early modern Bordeaux, Reformation Europe, and civil-war England (as it had in ancient Athens). Buchanan transforms the rhetoric of ancient Greek tragedy for the early modern academic stage. Moreover, as we shall show, Buchanan's own drama is itself transformed by different contexts: in performance or in print; in France or in England; in pedagogical, political, or religious spheres.

This chapter first sets out the importance of rhetoric in the most immediately local context for Buchanan's plays, the educational system of early modern Bordeaux. Drawing on Buchanan's translation of *Medea*, the first of his tragedies to be published (in 1544; it was performed in 1543), we show how Euripides was associated with a particular emphasis upon language as an agent of moral action. We then chart Buchanan's rigorous skepticism about the disconnection between words and deeds, a separation that undermines the vows that underpin both *Jephthes* and *Alcestis*. We show that this skepticism traces back to Euripides's tragedies and, especially, his critique of the Greek rhetorical tradition of sophistry. Finally, we explore the political afterlife of Buchanan's *Baptistes* in more detail than our introduction to this essay affords, revealing how mid-seventeenth-century republicans identify rhetorical hypocrisy as a key feature of tyranny – an idea central to Euripides, Buchanan, and the reception of their respective tragedies.

<sup>19</sup> See Philip Vellacott, *Ironic Drama: A Study of Euripides' Method and Meaning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975); Helene P. Foley, *Ritual Irony: Poetry and Sacrifice in Euripides* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985); and Mary Nyquist, *Arbitrary Rule: Slavery, Tyranny, and the Power of Life and Death* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 101.

### Rhetoric: *Medea*

So-called “academic drama” was not entirely novel in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, but the practice of staging plays (sometimes with biblical themes, often written in Latin) was reformed by humanist educators across Europe during that time.<sup>20</sup> It was expected that the performance of Roman comedies in their original Latin, new Latin plays, or ancient Greek tragedies translated into Latin would encourage a deeper engagement with the Latin language, its various stylistic registers, and the practicalities of rhetorical delivery. In addition, drama was believed to be uniquely effective in allowing – and eliciting – serious consideration of a range of emotional responses to moral and political questions, and thus informing the behavior of the future statesmen (and, very occasionally, women) of Europe.<sup>21</sup> Staged performances of Latin plays (and a few in ancient Greek) begin to be enshrined in the statutes of schools and colleges during the sixteenth century, both in England and across the Continent.<sup>22</sup> Buchanan refers to such a “custom” in Bordeaux by way of explaining how he came to write drama in the first place.<sup>23</sup> Propriety was a key motivation for the composition of many new Latin plays, with classical texts (particularly by Plautus) often considered immoral (“base stuff”).<sup>24</sup> Some secular plays shared enough values with Christian principles to be considered morally edifying, however, or had instructive epilogues to guide listeners towards a clear ethical purpose.

In keeping with such Christian humanist aims, Buchanan’s tragedies owe to Euripides an insistence that rhetoric is not merely a technical skill but something that determines – and sometimes contravenes – moral action, particularly in the political sphere. In his preface to *Alcestis*, Buchanan identifies Euripides’s “delightful” (*suavis*) sweetness as what makes the drama a useful pedagogical tool.<sup>25</sup> His plays, particularly the translations from Greek, foreground discussions about the use of rhetoric itself, exploring the capacity for words to prompt, or subvert, deeds. This

<sup>20</sup> Jan Bloemendal, “Receptions and Impact: Early Modern Latin Drama, its Effect on the Audience and its Role in Forming Public Opinion,” in *Neo-Latin Drama: Forms, Functions, Receptions*, ed. Bloemendal and Philip Ford (Hildesheim: Olms, 2008), 7–22.

<sup>21</sup> Robert S. Knapp, “The Academic Drama,” in *A Companion to Renaissance Drama*, ed. Arthur F. Kinney (London: Blackwell, 2002), 257–65 (p. 261).

<sup>22</sup> Howard B. Norland, *Neoclassical Tragedy in Elizabethan England* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2009), 44.

<sup>23</sup> James M. Aitken, *The Trial of George Buchanan Before the Lisbon Inquisition* (London: Oliver and Boyd, 1939), xxi.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> *Alcestis*, in Sharratt and Walsh, *George Buchanan*, 209–44. Subsequent references to Buchanan’s plays cited parenthetically by line number (from Latin text); here, Preface.17–20.

aspect of the dramas reflects Euripides's early modern reputation for rhetorical sophistication. As noted above, such associations seem to date from a depiction of Euripides as a character in a number of Aristophanes's plays, especially *Frogs*, where his rhetorical skill is contrasted with that of Aeschylus: "So it makes sense to expect that this one [Euripides] will say something sophisticated and finely honed, while that one [Aeschylus] will launch his attack with arguments torn up by the roots" (900–03). In the early modern period, when Aristophanes was a not uncommon presence in school curricula (along with the Roman writers he had influenced, such as Horace), this characterization was firmly entrenched.<sup>26</sup> Gasparus Stiblinus's important sixteenth-century edition of Euripides's works commented upon the rhetorical ingenuity of certain speeches, for instance.<sup>27</sup>

The agency of rhetoric is central to the plot of *Medea*, which is structured around the protagonist's encounters with three different male interlocutors. Abandoned by Jason (who has remarried the daughter of the local king of Corinth, Creon), and seeking her revenge, Medea must persuade each of these figures of something. She begs Creon for a one-day stay of exile, she seeks a promise of asylum from the Athenian king Aegeus, and she implores Jason to allow their children to deliver a wedding gift to his new wife – a gift that she has laced with poison. In contrast to Seneca's first-century CE Latin *Medea*, where the heroine is markedly a powerful manipulator of supernatural forces and the gods, Euripides's – and Buchanan's – Medea uses her wits, words, and persuasive skills to negotiate her way out of a desperate situation.<sup>28</sup> The audience is repeatedly invited to appreciate Medea's exceptional rhetorical skill; replying to her first suit for mercy, the king notes that her words are "ornate" (*speciosa*) and "alluring" (*blanda*, 340), but adds that her too-obvious attempts to persuade have backfired and made him trust her even less (342).<sup>29</sup>

Buchanan's *Medea* both debates and deploys rhetoric, encompassing ethical lessons about the purposes of oratory while simultaneously offering

<sup>26</sup> Matthew Steggle, "Aristophanes in Early Modern England," in *Aristophanes in Performance*, ed. Edith Hall and Amanda Wrigley (London: Legenda, 2007), 52–65 (pp. 54–56).

<sup>27</sup> Mastronarde, *The Art of Euripides*, 10. Stiblinus's Argument to the third act of *Andromache* commends the elegant speeches of Peleus and Menelaus, for example; see *Euripides Poeta: Tragicorum princeps in Latinum sermonem conversus, adiuncto e regione textu Graeco. Cum Annotationibus et Praefationibus in omnes eius Tragoedias: autore Gasparo Stiblino &c.* (Basle, 1562).

<sup>28</sup> See in particular Seneca's description of her magic at 684–738 (Seneca, *Medea*, ed. and trans. Anthony Boyle [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014]) and Boyle's introduction, cxxvi–ii. And see Zoé Schweitzer, "Buchanan, helléniste et dramaturge, interprète d'Euripide (*Medea* et *Alceste*)," *Études épistémè* 23 (2013): 2.

<sup>29</sup> *Medea*, in Sharratt and Walsh, *George Buchanan*, 165–208.



an exemplary performance of oratorical skill. Medea uses her rhetorical prowess to manipulate other characters into perceiving her actions to be driven by emotion, when they are in fact strategically planned. As she feigns residual spousal affection for Jason, Buchanan's Latin brings out her disgust at such dissimulation more strongly than Euripides's Greek. After Creon's exit, Buchanan's Medea sneers: "Do you think I would have been able to fawn on the tyrant, if there had been no hope of reward or of some new plan?" (392–93). Medea confides her self-consciously rhetorical strategy to the Chorus: she will make a very flattering speech (*blandior oratio*) to convince Jason to acquiesce to her new plan (819). Medea's body might betray her into weeping at the thought of the infanticide she intends – Jason asks, "But why are your cheeks wet with tears?" (967–68) – but she retains mastery of her rhetoric, deploying the ambiguity of dramatic irony ("It's nothing. The memory of the children came suddenly to mind" [970]) and playing on Jason's expectations of her gender ("Truly I am a woman; a gender born for tears" [972–73]).

Euripides's play productively illuminates the distance between words and deeds, an aspect of his writing that is heightened in performance, particularly in the local context of the Collège de Guyenne. Striking moments of collapse between the world on stage and the world of the Bordeaux schoolroom serve to foreground the performance's artifice. For example, early in the play, the statement that "a boy's mind is not open to serious concern at all" (50–52) invites wry self-reflection among pupils and teachers alike, sharpening the relevance of what will follow to all those on stage and in the audience. Equally ironic in the schoolroom context are statements concerning the use and dangers of learning: "Whoever is endowed with true wisdom (*prudentia*), let them not instruct their children in more education than reasonable, nor teach them to know too much. For besides the indolent idleness that comes with education, students also face the concomitant envy (*obliquus livor*) of the citizens" (315–19). Directly at odds with the pedagogical commitments of pupils and teachers, such lines must have struck a chord during *Medea*'s first performance. In the midst of the recent wars of religion, when scholars and tutors had been tried and even put to the stake for what they were teaching (as had been the case during Buchanan's stay in a politically restive Paris in the 1530s), the dangers of education (dismissed by the play's claim that "serious concern" never enters pupils' minds) were all too obvious to the Bordeaux academic community.<sup>30</sup> In the combustible political environment of 1530s France,

<sup>30</sup> Ian McFarlane, *Buchanan* (London: Duckworth, 1981), 39–40.

Buchanan had direct experience of exploiting rhetorical artifice to mask true intentions. Having fled Scotland shortly after the manuscript circulation of his incendiary and satirical *Franciscanus*, he let it be known he was thinking of travelling to Germany, before secretly returning in safety to Paris in the autumn of 1534.<sup>31</sup> Like Euripides's plays, which generate a particular kind of irony in the disconnect between words and deeds, Buchanan is aware of language's productive duplicity, an insight he deploys throughout his own drama.

### Skepticism: *Jephthes* and *Alcestis*

Buchanan's skepticism about vows illustrates his interest in exploring the particular form of linguistic duplicity associated with Euripides in the early modern period. This dilemma is perhaps most explicitly staged in two plays that are not usually read together by modern critics but which are intimately connected, having been printed together in a Strasbourg edition of 1567.<sup>32</sup> *Jephthes* and *Alcestis* were written around the same time and published within two years of one another. The texts' shared thematic concerns include a sense of radical disconnection between words and deeds, which derives from Euripidean precedent but also speaks to a series of local contexts relevant to the plays' first audiences and (later) readers. Both explore rash promises and the horror of being made to act on these ill-conceived vows – the compulsion, that is, to put rhetoric into action and make even misguided words into deeds. Moving beyond the local context of their first performance in Bordeaux, we can see how the unstable connection between word and deed shapes the reception of these two plays in post-Reformation Europe.

The binding power of vows – and the problems that ensue from acting on a morally dubious promise – forms the central tenet of the Old Testament-derived plot of *Jephthes*. In gratitude to his “one true God” for protecting his land and people during war, Jephtha swears that “The first thing to encounter me on my safe return at my house will be your welcome victim and will steep your altar with its blood” (486–87).<sup>33</sup> Greek tragic precedent is evoked when it becomes clear that Jephtha will be required to sacrifice his own daughter, Iphis, a development that recalls Agamemnon's fate in Euripides's *Iphigenia at Aulis* (Buchanan evokes the

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 76. *Franciscanus* would be published in Basel in 1568.

<sup>32</sup> *Alcestis a Georgio Buchanano conversa, cum Georgii Buchanani Jephthes, Tragoedia* (Strasbourg, 1567). See McFarlane, *Buchanan*, 202.

<sup>33</sup> *Jephthes*, in Sharratt and Walsh, *George Buchanan*, 21–94.

name of this Greek dramatic precursor in this new heroine). Jephtha of course immediately regrets his promise: "If only I had been wiser and more cautious in the terms of my vow!" (722–23). But, despite the entreaties of the other characters in a series of conversations that make up the main action of the play, Jephtha concludes that he must turn his words into actions, instigating the drama's tragic denouement.

Many interpretations of *Jephthes* have elided diachronic Euripidean resonances by elaborating the synchronous contexts – religious and, latterly, political – in which the play was written.<sup>34</sup> Jephtha's soon-regretted promise has frequently been read with reference to an ongoing sixteenth-century preoccupation with the legitimacy of clerical vows and particularly an exchange of pamphlets between Bartholomew Latomus and Martin Bucer in 1543–44 that debate whether a morally questionable vow should be implemented.<sup>35</sup> Buchanan himself gives some grounds for such readings in his First Defence, which explicitly links *Jephthes* to the clerical debate.<sup>36</sup> This synchronic local reading elicits caution, however, not least because much of the relevant polemic was published too late to have influenced the initial composition of the play.<sup>37</sup> Furthermore, such allegorical interpretation is unlikely to have found favor with Buchanan himself, who expressed his "hope that by acting in such plays" as he was himself writing, "the youth of Bordeaux might be weaned from the allegories then so very popular in France" ("allegories" here indicating plays that directly parallel characters depicted on stage and contemporary religious or political figures).<sup>38</sup> Local reading requires focusing less on synchronic authorial intent than on considering the plays' diachronic transformation by the different circumstances in which they were first performed and then read. The plays' relationships with Reformation theology would have seemed quite different for their early academic audiences at Bordeaux and for those reading *Jephthes* and *Alcestis* in their first printed editions in Paris or even London, at a time when the Latomus-Bucer debate was much more recent and its implications more readily accessible. Local contexts, that is, impact reading

<sup>34</sup> For the topical relevance of the question of the sanctity of promises in the increasingly contract-based theological, legal, and political systems of sixteenth-century Europe, see Victoria Kahn, *Wayward Contracts: The Crisis of Political Obligation in England, 1640–1674* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 10, and Nyquist, *Arbitrary Rule*, 110.

<sup>35</sup> Sharratt and Walsh, *George Buchanan*, 14; Raymond Lebègue, *La tragédie religieuse en France: les débuts (1514–1573)* (Paris: Champion, 1929), 229–34.

<sup>36</sup> Aitken, *Trial of George Buchanan*, 12.

<sup>37</sup> Sharratt and Walsh, *George Buchanan*, 15; McFarlane, *Buchanan*, 197.

<sup>38</sup> Aitken, *Trial of George Buchanan*, xxi.

as these texts are transformed and activated by the different worlds they inhabit at different points in their existence.

A diachronic sense of local context also alerts us that Buchanan's dramatic language can change its meaning over time, or be subject to promiscuous interpretation. Inconstancy is the driving force behind *Jephthes*. The fickleness of fortune represents the play's prime inheritance from the Greek tragic drama: "Alas for the transformation of swift-moving fate!" declares the Chorus (746). Whereas vows depend upon linguistic stability and exact correspondence between the language of promise and the actions that fulfill it, *Jephthes* invokes the possibility of words diverging from their original meanings. Lamenting the "treacherous fickleness of fate," for instance, the Chorus offers an image of life in which "if any joy dawns, it swiftly flies away on the hastening breeze like the vanishing light of a fleeting flame in dry straw. Then columns of enduring grief approach, joined in unbroken chains" (833–41). The "hastening breeze" that quickly dispatches any prospect of joy is also the "dry straw" upon which a "fleeting flame" flickers; Buchanan's series of metaphors evokes at the level of language the play's central theme of changeability. Such linguistic flights of fancy prompt suspicion of words' capacity to accurately represent deeds, and the distance the play opens up between language and meaning is part of its deeply cynical effect.

This sense of instability is augmented by the clash Buchanan's drama stages between classical and biblical worlds, and their vastly differing moral codes. Buchanan highlights the sometimes uncomfortable intersection of biblical and classical traditions, never more so than in a central scene where Jephtha seeks (and rejects) the advice of a priest on his terrible dilemma: "God ordered Abraham to slay his son," he says there, to which the priest replies, "And having commanded this, he also forbade him to kill" (920–21). The awkward juxtaposition of Jephtha's situation with both his biblical precursor's, whom God does not require to complete the sacrifice initially demanded, and Greek tragic precedent, in which Iphigenia escapes her fate at the last moment when Artemis snatches her up and takes her across the Black Sea to Tauris, stages the difficulties of reconciling the moral universes of pagan and Christian, ancient and (early) modern.

### **Hypocrisy: *Baptistes***

We have begun to see how Buchanan's dramatic works follow Euripides's tragedies in revealing the distance between rhetoric and action, opening up the ironic disconnect between words and deeds to lay bare the fundamental

instability of language. The “Prologus” attached to Buchanan’s other “original” play, *Baptistes*, at once attacks would-be critics for inconstancy and simultaneously exhibits a rhetorical bravado of which the Sophists would have been proud. *Baptistes* tells the story of John the Baptist and what is presented as his persecution at the hands of King Herod and his family. This prologue fascinatingly combines Buchanan’s own situation as a playwright attempting to remake biblical narrative in dramatic form (and indeed to remake pagan Greek tragedy in Christian form) with the dilemma facing his protagonist. Both Buchanan and the Baptist must delicately negotiate between innovation and tradition as they seek to transform literary genres and religio-political doctrine, respectively. Comparing would-be critics of his play to Proteus, the emblem of inconstancy, Buchanan writes that “if anyone produces an ancient plot, [critics] make annoying interruptions, they cough and retch. But if anyone introduces a new one, they at once demand and approve and praise and love the old” (15–18).<sup>39</sup> Emulating the defensive prologues of Terence’s comedies, Buchanan tries to escape such willfully perverse censure by claiming for his drama a status both innovative and traditional, “a new play, or rather an old story refurbished” (37–38). *Baptistes* is likewise Protean in its form: a remodeling of Aristotelian tragic form (expanded from five acts to six) to fit scriptural narrative. As in *Jephthes*, Greek tragedy is ubiquitous in *Baptistes*. Its omnipresent chorus and their odes contextualizing and complicating the play’s central concepts of pride and tyranny, its deployment of typically Euripidean sophisticated rhetoric, and its multiple duels of words all allude to its classical Greek inheritance.

Buchanan’s attempts to transform the genre in which he writes by creating an Aristotelian *via media* between Old Testament and Greek tragic models accords with a rhetoric of moderation that *Baptistes* consistently values. Extremism repeatedly comes under scrutiny, whether Herod’s apparent tyranny or the Baptist’s unwillingness to flex in his moral commitments. From the beginning of the play, when Gamaliel derides Malchus’s lack of “moderation” [*modestia*] (239) in the (false) charges he levels against the Baptist, to the extremist beheading that Herod’s daughter demands, Buchanan probes the limits of what can be reasonably justified.<sup>40</sup> Just as moderation served as a key term in debates about rhetoric, so too *Baptistes* tests out various definitions of the word. Herod opposes the “moderate” [*modestus*] prince to a “harsh” [*asper*] one,

<sup>39</sup> *Baptistes*, in Sharratt and Walsh, *George Buchanan*, 95–164.

<sup>40</sup> Buchanan, *Baptistes*, 1169–72, p. 159; 1198, p. 160; 1251–54, p. 162; 1325, p. 163.

as he ponders how he should treat the Baptist, noting that the people despise both kinds of ruler (539–40).<sup>41</sup> Reflecting Buchanan's point from the prologue about Protean critical tastes, Herod here raises the problem of pleasing no one by seeking to please everyone – a fear that Malchus also conjures as indecision in the face of a divinely bestowed freedom of choice. “Kings must be feared; they need not be loved,” his daughter entreats him (1214–15). By the latter stages of the drama Herod has indeed adopted the more decisive position urged upon him by his wife and daughter, embracing a kind of rule that has little room for moderation. “The king by his command can make just what was earlier unjust,” his daughter remarks with chilling clarity; “I shall now ensure that the headstrong people learns, even at its own cost, to speak of its kings with moderation,” Herodias vows, “and whether kings enjoin just or unjust commands, the people must believe that they are all to be borne without resentment” (1204–05; 1260–63).

The hypocrisy of demanding “moderation” in the behavior of the people toward a ruler who shows none toward them goes to the heart of the play's concern with the troubled relationship between action and language, between deeds and mere sophistry. Ethan Shagan has powerfully shown how a rhetoric of moderation in fact served as “a profoundly coercive tool of social, religious and political power” in the early modern period, requiring a form of control “with no firm boundary between the ethical governance of the self and the political governance of others.”<sup>42</sup> Moderation takes on particular significance in debates about the reform of religious ritual, staged here in the play's opening discussion between two theologically opposed priests. Gamaliel shares the Baptist's view that “God does not look to scepters, ancestral genealogies, beauty of appearance or royal wealth, but to hearts stained with no infection of cruelty, deceit and lust” (154–57); Malchus denounces such reforming views and loathes the Baptist for espousing them: “Can you persuade me that the man who despises laws, promotes new sects and new rites, attacks with abuse the teachers of the people, and disparages the priests is good?” (126–29). John himself insists that his religious practice represents no innovation, but rather a return to “our ancient rites and customs” (486–87), rituals that have been neglected by the hypocritical clergy who abandon their

<sup>41</sup> On an emergent discourse of tolerance in the play, see Dermot Cavanagh, “Political Theology in George Buchanan's *Baptistes*,” in *Early Modern Drama and the Bible: Contexts and Readings, 1570–1625*, ed. Adrian Streete (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 89–104 (pp. 95–96).

<sup>42</sup> Ethan H. Shagan, *The Rule of Moderation: Violence, Religion and the Politics of Restraint in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 3, 4.

congregations' spiritual education and fail to protect them from the dangers of sin.

With equally breathtaking hypocrisy, Herod repeatedly bemoans the state of kings, subject as they are to the will of their people: "The condition of kings is wretched if it fears the wretched," he says (367); "one must act the people's servant to preserve kingly power" (546–48). To ignore the will of the people is something that Herod clearly brands tyrannical early in the play, when he observes that the difference between kings and tyrants is that "the king keeps watch on enemies, whereas the tyrant is the enemy of the citizens" (371–72). But by the latter stages he has become the tyrant he earlier denounced, acknowledging that his reputation will be determined by his decision to execute the Baptist: "rumor will brand me as a tyrant, not as king" (1211).<sup>43</sup> The key distinction between these two kinds of ruler lies in the precise nature of the power of the law to regulate the relationship between the wills of the people and of their monarch. When Herod reminds his daughter that "the law enjoins a limit to the king's commanding," she replies that "if the law is what the prince has decreed, the law does not limit kings, but the king the laws" (1207–08).

Buchanan here evokes a recurring critique of rhetoric – and of tragedy – in ancient Greece, where the moral force of speech, particularly political oratory, was often questioned. Gorgias's sophistic encomium of Helen uses the same word, *apatē*, to signify both "persuasion" and "deceit."<sup>44</sup> Jeroen Bons argues that Sophists discerned a parallel between the kind of illusion created in theaters and the performative (even deliberately misleading) rhetoric of the lawcourts and the Assembly: "the connecting element between tragedy and rhetoric is *apatē* ['deceit']."<sup>45</sup> The king's claim to be subject to the law (as a sanctioned embodiment of the will of the people) while he usurps the authority of the law to his own ends is a defining moment of hypocrisy in *Baptistes*. In this, the play simultaneously seems to prefigure the worst possible outcome of James VI's rule (of Scotland, and later of England too) and at the same time to anticipate the charges many would level against Charles I by the time the anonymous pamphlet *A Tyrannical Government Anatomiz'd: or, a Discourse concerning evil Counsellors, being the Life and Death of John the Baptist, and presented to*

<sup>43</sup> Buchanan's *De jure regni* explores the etymology – and differing definitions – of "tyrant." See Rebecca Bushnell, *Tragedies of Tyrants: Political Thought and Theater in the English Renaissance* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), 45–47.

<sup>44</sup> *The Greek Sophists*, ed. John M. Dillon and Tania Gergel (London: Penguin 2003), 76–84.

<sup>45</sup> Bons, "Gorgias the Sophist," 43–44.



*the King's most excellent Majesty*, was printed some sixty years after Buchanan's death.<sup>46</sup>

Somewhat ironically, given Buchanan's denunciation of Protean changeability in *Baptistes's* prologue and the critique of inconstancy staged within the play itself, the tragedy provides a compelling example of a play transformed by its various early modern contexts with which to conclude this chapter. Originally written at a moment in Bordeaux's history when religious persecution of Protestants (with whom Buchanan, heavily versed in Erasmian evangelical humanism, may have had some sympathy) was on the rise, the play's concerns with a conflict between entrenched religious practices and attempts to modernize theological doctrine would have been sharply felt by its first audience at the Collège de Guyenne in 1542.<sup>47</sup> In his later trial before the Portuguese Inquisition, Buchanan contradicted his earlier opposition to allegory in the interests of self-preservation. He suggested that *Baptistes* allegorically represents the clash between Thomas More and Henry VIII – which avoided any more dangerously local, which is to say more recent, readings.<sup>48</sup> By 1577, however, when the play was eventually published, its significance had again been transformed. Buchanan himself wrote a preface dedicating the work to James VI (whose tutor he had been) and portraying the tragedy as a warning to the future monarch of Great Britain against tyranny: “when they [tyrants] seem to prosper the most, it [the play] exposes distinctly their wretchedness” (Preface to *Baptistes*, 12–13). The anonymous English translation of 1642 that Peck mistakenly attributed to Milton was once more transformed by the local context in which it appeared: *Baptistes's* efforts to distinguish between properly circumscribed kingship and unmitigated, immoderately tyrannical rule resonated strongly with the ongoing debate about the behavior of Charles I that would eventually lead to full-blown civil war and the king's execution in 1649.<sup>49</sup>

As we have seen, *Baptistes's* “local” contexts were serial. Buchanan's words were placed in a variety of contexts and called upon to service a series of causes. The play was diachronically transformed by its readers, who imposed a variety of interpretations according to the local political and polemical demands of each moment of encounter. The moral flexibility of the

<sup>46</sup> *A Tyrannical Government Anatomiz'd* (London, 1642).

<sup>47</sup> On Buchanan's “evangelical humanism,” see McFarlane, *Buchanan*, 16.

<sup>48</sup> While there are reasons to treat this claim skeptically, the interpretation has persisted. See Sharratt and Walsh, *George Buchanan*, 11, on material provided in Aitken, *Trial*, 24; see also McFarlane, *Buchanan*, 383–85.

<sup>49</sup> For an account of a civil war soldier who despised the play for enflaming republicanism, see Clare Jackson, “Buchanan in Hell: Sir James Turner and Civil War Royalism,” in *George Buchanan*, ed. Erskine and Mason, 205–28.



tragedy's language attests to the rhetorical sophistication of Buchanan's *Baptistes*. It also highlights Euripides's own insights about the dramatic tension between the synchronic moment of verbal utterance and the diachronic workings of the worlds that words inhabit, via performance, literary reception, and critical interpretation. Our reading of Buchanan's drama, and the Euripidean tradition it draws upon, has shown how recognizing this strongly diachronic aspect of reception enables us to rethink our sense of the "local."

### Further Reading

- Jan Bloemendal and Philip Ford, *Neo-Latin Drama: Forms, Functions, Receptions* (Hildesheim: Olms, 2008).
- Caroline Erskine and Roger Mason, eds., *George Buchanan: Political Thought in Early Modern Britain and Europe* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012).
- Kristine Louise Haugen, "The Birth of Tragedy in the Cinquecento: Humanism and Literary History," in *Journal of the History of Ideas* 72.3 (2011): 351–70.
- I. D. McFarlane, *Buchanan* (London: Duckworth, 1981).
- Bruce R. Smith, *Ancient Scripts and Modern Experience on the English Stage, 1500–1700* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988).
- Helen Watanabe-O'Kelly, "The Renaissance Meets the Reformation: The Dramatist Thomas Neogeorg (1508–1563)," in *The Reinvention of Theatre in Sixteenth-Century Europe: Traditions, Texts and Performance*, eds. C. Fouto and T. C. Earle (Leeds: Legenda, 2014), 317–31.